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ABSTRACT

The major objective of this study was to examine and describe how a large urban school system (the School District of Philadelphia) responds to crisis generated by student unrest. The purpose was to test the notion that crisis, under certain management conditions, may result in positive change or development. The procedure consisted of two parts. The first considered the extent to which student unrest-related crises occurred in the Public Schools of Philadelphia and their effect upon the system. The second part examined in greater detail the inputs to the system, the process by which they were used, and the outputs which resulted from a single recent major system crisis linked to student unrest. A version of Good and Scates' phases of a case study was used as a model to organize part two into four sections--(1) the status of the situation; (2) the collection of data; (3) an overview of the process; and, (4) an examination of the outputs. Three general results are reported: (1) the crisis was promptly identified as such, and dealt with accordingly; (2) the immediate crisis was resolved, and steps were taken to develop and implement strategies for avoiding similar occurrences; and (3) the process employed by the Superintendent of Schools in dealing with the crisis situation indicates a systems approach, a development orientation, and an understanding of crisis management. (Author/JM)

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THE IMPACT OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT UPON URBAN STUDENT UNREST

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THE IMPACT OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT UPON URBAN STUDENT UNREST

Introduction

Although a great deal has been written about student unrest during the past several years, the majority of such contributions have been of the most general nature. Incredible as it may seem, after being buffeted so continuously by the winds of student dissent and disruption, many educators have still not progressed any further than merely recognizing that such unrest exists. The current literature reflects this trend, in that articles dealing with the causes of unrest are just beginning to appear, and material geared toward analyzing the causes and developing suitable solutions is scarce.

This study consisted of an in-depth historical examination of an urban educational system's response to student unrest, as well as a detailed case study of a recent major system crisis linked to student unrest. A number of areas were considered in the study including the following concepts:

1. Student unrest is one of the major forces affecting education today.

2. Student unrest often leads to major crisis situations in educational systems.

3. Among the major causes of student unrest and the crises which often accompany it, are the inability of systems, often because of their structure, to respond to students' needs.

4. Under certain management conditions, crisis may result in educational development.

5. Educational administrators can play a crucial role in guiding a system through crisis and toward development.

6. Educational administrators, however, have demonstrated both a reluctance and an inability to deal with crisis.

7. Certain responses to crisis and strategies for dealing with unrest have been used successfully.

8. In order for an educational administrator to respond successfully to crisis and facilitate the development of his system, he should be able to delineate and solve problems, and function as a crisis manager when necessary.

Objectives

The major objective of this study was to examine and describe how a large urban school system responds to crisis generated by student unrest. The purpose was to test the notion that crisis, under certain management conditions, may result in positive change or development.

The above primary objective is dependent upon two sub-objectives. The first was to examine, over a period of years, crises related to student unrest and the response of the educational system (The School District of Philadelphia) to such crises. This historical macro-view of the system was to test the hypothesis that crisis situations may lead to development. The second sub-objective was to analyze a single, recent major system crisis (micro-view) related to student unrest, in order to determine and examine the inputs available during the crisis, the process by which they were utilized, and the outputs which resulted.

Methodology

The methodology employed was characterized as a case study technique used as a piece of action research. The procedure consisted of two parts. The first considered the extent to which student unrest-related crises occurred in the Public Schools of Philadelphia, and their effect upon the system. The second part examined in greater detail the inputs to the system, the process by which they were used, and the outputs which resulted from single recent major system crisis linked to student unrest.

The first part of the study reported a total of thirty-seven incidents. These incidents represent the more notable instances of student unrest experienced in Philadelphia during the past twenty years. A total of thirteen different secondary schools were involved, and were grouped into four time frames before being examined. (These time frames were: prior to 1958, 1958-1967, 1967-70, and 1970-71.) Four primary sources of information were utilized to develop the incident descriptions--interviews, newspaper articles, other miscellaneous documents, and personal observation or involvement. The same sources of information were used to identify the six areas of change which followed the instances of student unrest.

In the second part a more structured and complete form of the case study was employed to explore a single crisis situation, in depth. A version of Good and Scates' phases of a case study was used as a model to organize this part into four sections--(1) the status of the situation, (2) the collection of data, (3) an overview of the process, and (4) an examination of the outputs. In the section on the status of the situation, the crisis was completely examined in terms of its background, the causes,

the participants, the actual incident, the immediate system responses, and the rationale for viewing the situation as a crisis.

Collection of the data was dependent upon first developing a taxonomy for categorizing the groups and individuals which provided inputs. The taxonomy which was constructed first distinguished between groups and individuals. These two classes were then divided into sub-categories. Three categories of groups were identified--professional education and educational resource groups, civic-educational groups, and civic groups. The individuals contributing inputs were divided into four types--professional educators, politicians, parents, and other citizens. Once the taxonomy was completed, inputs from the major referent groups and individuals (which had been previously identified) were collected, categorized, and examined.

The third section dealt with the process by which the inputs were gathered and generated into outputs. In this section, the process was examined by means of an overview of eight types of activities, a chronology of the major events, and a look at the impact of the Board of Education. The fourth and final section examined the outputs generated by the crisis.

Results

The results of the study can best be reported if the two parts are examined separately. Since, however, the findings of the first part do not deal directly with crisis management, only the second part will be considered here.

The following three general results can be reported:

1. The crisis was promptly identified as such, and dealt with accordingly.

2. The immediate crisis was resolved, and steps were taken to develop and implement middle and long-range strategies for avoiding similar occurrences in the future.

3. The process exployed by the Superintendent of Schools in dealing with the crisis situation indicates a systems approach, a development orientation, and an understanding of crisis management.

Perhaps the most significant result of studying this major system crisis was, through observation, to isolate the steps of the process used to deal with it. The approach which was employed was clearly systematic, showed knowledge of planning, and had the development of the system as its goal. The steps that were utilized have been identified as follows:

1. Comprehension of a system dysfunction and admission of a crisis situation. This first critical step took place within 12 hours of the initial incident. Had the realization of the situation and the commitment to act taken place later, the crisis would likely have spread unchecked, and been more difficult to deal with.

2. Request for complete context information. This step enabled the decision makers to become fully aware of the status of the situation, and to react to immediate system crises. Arrangements were also made to receive all necessary information on an on-going basis.

3. Awareness of the problems. Both the immediate and longer-range problems were identified here--the immediate problems so follow-up could be instituted, and the longer-range problems so planning could be initiated. Without initial identification of the areas causing the dysfunction, the following steps could not have been executed.

4. Identification of goals. Goals were viewed as broad, general areas of concern which had to be delineated immediately. Key School District decision-makers and resource personnel met with the Superintendent to develop the general goals prior to meeting with the Board.

5. Selection of targets. The specific targets (operational statements of the goals) were also discussed prior to meeting with the Board of Education. Basic targets were then presented to the Board, and were revised and clarified so that the task could begin.

6. Collection of inputs. This task was begun at once so that all possible alternatives would be identified. Inputs continued to be gathered after the initial recommendations were formulated, with the notion that revisions would undoubtedly be necessary.

7. Identification of necessary changes. This step was possible once the status of the situation was known, the goals and targets were set, and alternative solutions were being gathered. It was viewed as a tentative step, however, for the alternatives had yet to be thoroughly scrutinized.

8. Evaluation of the inputs. This was accomplished on an informal, but rigorous basis. In most cases each different alternative was considered in a number of contexts by over a dozen people and on several occasions.

9. Testing of the selected inputs against the constraints posed by the system. This served as an evaluation of feasibility, and was a crucial step in the planning process. Certain alternatives, in their original form, could not be implemented because of specific Board of Education organization, or community objections. Advanced knowledge of this enabled the group developing the recommendations to restructure those alternatives or adopt more palatable substitutes for them.

10. Restructuring of the goals where necessary. At this juncture,

the goals were inspected so as to compare them with the alternatives being considered. Although it was generally the alternatives which were adjusted to meet the goals, the process was structured so that if justification could be made, the goals, themselves, would be altered.

11. Development of the recommendations. With this step, the first output of the process was generated. The output resulted from all of the ten previous steps, and at best, the recommendations (output) were viewed as tentative.

12. "Testing" the recommendations. Initial "testing" was accomplished by sharing the tentative output with selected persons prior to its presentation to the Board of Education. Their suggestions were then discussed by the task force and those which indicated a need for changes in the recommendations were held for the next step.

13. Restructuring the recommendations. This was accomplished by comparing the initial output with the suggestions indicated above. The restructuring consisted of clarifying some items, and adding or deleting others. This testing-restructuring operation actually took place several times.

14. Presentation for approval. As a third step in the testing process, the revised recommendations were here presented to the Board of Education for their approval. The Board made a number of minor changes, and added a major recommendation before granting permission to proceed with implementation.

15. Implementation of the recommendations. Included as part of each of the resulting recommendations was a person or group designated as responsible for implementing the recommendation, as well as a date by which a specified portion of the implementation process was set in motion.

16. Monitoring the implementation. A single individual was assigned to monitor the implementation process, and report its progress to the Superintendent and his Executive Cabinet on a regular basis. In addition, the Board was scheduled to receive similar information several times during the six months that followed.

Discussion of the Results

The major hypothesis upon which this study was predicated--that certain management conditions crisis may result in educational development--seems to have held true in this case. In the macro-view, 37 incidents were examined over a twenty-year period and 15 significant responses to such instances of student unrest were identified. Though few of the responses could, in most cases, be related to one particular incident, it was established that they were, in fact, instituted as reactions to student unrest. The micro-view established the relationship more succinctly. In studying a single major system crisis (linked to student unrest) by examing the inputs to the crisis, the process by which they were used to generate outputs, and the outputs, themselves, a direct relationship can be established between the crisis and those outputs directed toward positive change, or the development of the system.

Certain conditions clearly led to the outcomes described, whereas the data was insufficient to relate other conditions to the results. Though the crisis, itself, was not responsible for the development which occurred, the way in which it was managed was the key. The crisis situation was immediately diagnosed as such, and no reluctance was shown in dealing with it. A proactive "management approach" was taken and, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, a planning orientation was evident. Critical to the success

of this approach was the involvement of the various constituencies which composed the context of the system. Every effort was made to gather inputs from all possible sources, with particular energy being exerted in the identification of groups and individuals which might have divergent solutions to the crisis.

On the other hand, though the system had made great strides in dealing with the causes of student unrest, such advances had proved insufficient to prevent the major incident described in the study and the crisis which resulted. The Superintendent moved quickly to deal with the crisis, but realizing that he could not devote full time to its resolution and continue to administer the school system, he appointed a project manager to work with him. Steps for dealing with the crisis were not laid out in advance of the situation, though immediately after the incident, a network was developped for dealing with it. The efforts of a single individual, therefore, were not solely responsible for the outcome, but the way in which he utilized available resources must be attributed to him. The incident which provoked the crisis was not anticipated, though it is doubtful that it could have been prevented. In acknowledging the crisis, however, system dysfunctions were admitted, and the ramifications which could cause further crisis were dealt with. Specific guidelines for coping with student discipline and violence had not been developed beforehand, and could not have led to the outcome of the situation. Nor were there specific contingency plans available to deal with such a crisis, and impact upon its resolution.

At the outset of the study it was contended that little attention had been paid to the notion that administrators could guide their systems

through crisis in such a way that the crisis would lead to the development of that system. This study dealt with that notion as one of its central foci, found that an administrator can function as stated above, and provided a detailed examination of how it was accomplished in one large urban school system. Bridges' finding--that present school practices lead to student-initiated crises and, in turn, to system reform--is also supported by this study.

Though the "management approach" to dealing with crisis succeeded in this particular situation, it would be erroneous to assume that it is generalizable, in that form, to all situations. It would be more correct to state that a general two-part approach, which anticipates the likelihood of crisis occurring, may be used successfully in working toward educational system development. This approach relies upon (1) a planning orientation to administration being internalized as standard operating procedure and (2) an acknowledgment of crisis when it occurs and a willingness to confront it, utilizing management and planning skills so that the changes that result are positive.

An example of a general planning orientation to educational administration is one which views the administrative process systemically and utilizes the steps basic to planning as a tool for problem solving and decision-making. Such an orientation is based upon determining a set of decision alternatives for action in the future, geared toward accomplishing a specified goal by the most optimal means. Dror described the necessary steps in planning as (1) describing the environment, (2) awareness of the problem, (3) identifying the goal, (4) setting the targents, (5) determining the amount of change that will have to take place, (6) viewing the feasibility of that change, considering the constraints posed by the system, and (7) restructuring when and where necessary. The approach which was used

to manage the crisis described coincided closely with these steps.

The reason that the Superintendent was able to successfully manage his system during crisis is that he did not function as might a traditional administrator, whose major purpose is one of system maintenance. Instead, he functioned as an administrator-developer--an individual who is prepared to cope with crisis, and is oriented to (1) identifying problems, (2) evaluating the context in which the problems exist, and (3) pursuring rational solutions to the problems. The administrator-developer deals with the changing educational system as well as the larger community in which it exists, so that the students produced by the system meet certain goals specified by the community. As such, he is concerned with utilizing inputs (e.g., teachers, facilities) to the school system in the most efficient way to produce the outputs (e.g., educated students) desired.

In the review of the literature it was found that administrators were reluctant to admit to dysfunctions in their systems. Therefore, the crises which often resulted were not acknowledged as such and could not be managed. In the case studied here, however, the Superintendent and his Executive Cabinet actually anticipated the crisis which the initial incident would produce before it occurred and took immediate steps to respond to it. That response demonstrated that there was no reticence in identifying system dysfunctions, several of which were merely tangential to the crisis.

Although the response to the crisis described was immediate, it was not a plan that could be implemented without further planning. It would have little real impact until it was fully implemented. Steps were taken to begin implementing each of the recommendations, and some of them were

carried to fruition in a short length of time. However, due to the intrusion of another crisis--a financial one--the implementation of many of the recommendations was delayed. The full potential for development generated by the crisis will not be realized until the financial crisis is also resolved.

The literature study also demonstrated that when administrators did acknowledge the existence of crisis and attempted to respond to it, the crisis was usually so far developed that it was too late to plan for constructive change emanating from that incident. Administrators who have faced crisis in their system tended to plan for its recurrence, but such responses generally were of an emergency/contingency plan nature. The causes of the crisis were seldom examined. This was not the case in the situation examined here, however. The antecedents of the crisis were studied and responded to as if they presented an active emergency. Contingency plans were operable prior to the situation, so that considerable energy could be devoted to middle-and long-range change strategies, rather than just to immediate survival.

By examining the inputs and outputs to the crisis situation studied, the fact emerges that the notion of meeting the needs and expectations of the schools' constituency in a large city is an extremely complex task. There were dozens of different client groups to be dealt with during the crisis, many of which had divergent expectations as to how it should be resolved. Flexibility is necessary in attempting to mediate between a variety of expectations.

To be effective, an administrator must be able to make rational decisions based upon valid information. He must also be cognizant of the expectations of this constituency, for the planning process includes such considerations. An administrator's final decisions and recommendations can

be made only after considering all inputs and alternatives.

This raises a question of the relationship between expectations and objectives. It was found in this study that specific goals and objectives had not been established to deal with student unrest prior to the crisis. This made a consideration of many alternatives voiced after the incident more difficult. Had such goals and objectives already been established, the freshly-voiced expectations could have been used to revise or refine them. However, since goals and objectives were not available, they had to be formulated "from scratch" as the initial step of the planning process, and tempered with the expectations of the system's clients in order to generate the recommendations.

Conclusions

Any generalizations based upon the results of this study must take into account the nature of the population, the definition of terms, and the methodology utilized to collect the information. However, as a result of the findings, the following conclusions seem warranted:

1. At a certain point, a system dysfunction will lead to crisis, which if not resolved, may, in turn, lead to disruption. Disruption is often of a violent nature, and will generally create more serious crises.

2. It is necessary to meet the needs of many diverse groups of clients to avoid and to resolve crisis in a large urban school system. The very survival of a school system depends upon its leaders' ability to identify and progress toward those goals and objectives which are most important to its clients. To reiterate what Simon has said, "To survive, an organization must have an objective that appeals to its customers, or contributions to sustain it will not be forthcoming."

3. The above statement does not take into consideration that very different objectives may appeal to different sets of clients. Those who support a school system financially (parents and taxpayers) may hold certain expectations to which those who attend the schools may strongly object. One of the most difficult tasks an administrator must face is to mediate between such disparate points of view in establishing the goals of the system, designing the system's policy, and managing its implementation.

4. The best planning and the most expert crisis management will not eliminate student unrest. Active student unrest has been recorded for almost a millenium, and there is no reason to expect that it will cease in the near future. Planning and crisis management can, however, affect the changes caused by such unrest so that they are geared toward the development of an educational system rather than toward its destruction.

5. A successful administrator must be able to manage organizational disequalibrium--that is, the discrepancy between how an organization actually functions and its potential to operate more effectively. The gap between the actual and the potential may create crisis.

6. The major variables affecting educational development are (a) the pressure for change, often manifested in terms of crisis, (b) the general receptivity of the system, (c) the persons who advocate the change, (d) the power such persons wield, and (e) the process by which the change is introduced and managed.

The preceding list of conclusions is by no means exhaustive, and merely represents the most obvious findings of this study. What is most critical, however, is that educators cease to view the destructive effects

of crisis as a fait accompli and, instead, learn to manage crises so that they bring about the development of educational systems.